TL1443-12

Statement on East Timor
To the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization

August 9, 1990

Distinguished Committee Members;

I have the honor of representing the Free East Timor Japan Coalition, an association of citizens' groups in Japan which is working to raise public awareness of the East Timor issue, particularly with respect to Japan's involvement.

Fifteen years ago interested parties in Japan fully expected that East Timor would speedily achieve independence. An organization called the Japan-Timor Association had sent fact-finding missions to the territory and drew up a $300 million development project which it planned to launch after independence was achieved(1). The Association closely monitored events in East Timor, and the conclusions which it arrived at then have, I believe, a lot to tell us about why, fifteen years later, the Indonesian takeover of East Timor has not satisfied the just desire of the Timorese for self-determination.(2)

As you know, the Timorese were originally given the options of independence, association with Portugal, or integration with Indonesia, and there were Timorese parties representing each of these options. In Sept. 1975 it appeared to the Japanese businessmen that total independence was the inevitable outcome of the decolonization process. They believed that of the various forces, "the group that stands for total independence will doubtless be victorious," because this was the wish of the "Timorese masses."(3)

As for the option of joining Indonesia, the Association spokesman categorically stated that "the Timorese do not like Indonesia, and thus only a very few people would like to be under Indonesian rule."(4)

However, although East Timor did not want Indonesia, it was clear that Indonesia wanted East Timor and was "very

interested in intervening."(5) The Association spokesperson painted a then hypothetical scenario in which Indonesian troops invaded East Timor with heavy artillery and tanks, met with resistance and got bogged down in a guerrilla war. The Association member predicted, incorrectly, as it turned out, that Indonesia would not attempt an invasion because it had "international public opinion" to contend with.(6)

Of course three months later, Indonesian troops did invade East Timor. And when that happened official Japanese policy was one of active support for Indonesia. Not only was Japan one of the twelve countries which voted against the General Assembly resolution of December 12, 1975 calling on Indonesia to withdraw its troops from East Timor, but the Japanese ambassador at the time, by his own admission, lobbied to garner support for Indonesia.(7)

Just as "international public opinion" did not prevent Indonesia from invading, Japanese public opinion did not prevent the Japanese government from, de facto, supporting the invasion. As a matter of fact it was not until the 1980s that in-depth information on East Timor began to circulate among non-governmental organizations in Japan concerned with human rights and, via them, to reach the mass media.

Now, fifteen years later, if one asks what was gained by Japan closing its eyes to the brutal violation of East Timor, I am afraid that not even one positive result can be cited. Indonesian troops have yet to withdraw from the territory,. and, as we know from the poignant letter sent by the bishop of East Timor last year to UN Secretary General, the people of East Timor are still waiting for the opportunity to exercise their right of self-determination. The decolonization process in East Timor has not moved forward one iota since 1975.

The reports from East Timor in the year since this committee session was held last August, such as the reports of demonstrations and arrests at the time of the Pope's visit in October, reports of frequent pro-independence demonstrations by young people in the capital of Dili, reports of a new Indonesian military offensive earlier this year, such reports unmistakably give the impression that the East Timorese are as adamantly opposed to integration today as they were in 1975.

This is not surprising. In this same one-year period we have witnessed one nation after another, in Eastern Europe for instance, assert its right to independence after, not fifteen, but closer to fifty years of subjugation by a powerful neighbor.

The Timorese should not have to wait fifty years. The Free East Timor Japan Coalition believes that countries like Japan, which have a substantial flow of both trade and aid to Indonesia,(8) should use this leverage to encourage Indonesia to enter negotiations toward a settlement that guarantees the East Timorese the right of self-determination. Only five or six years ago it was rare for the Japanese Government to be challenged on its ODA policies. This is not so today.(9) There is growing public opinion in Japan demanding accountability, in terms of human rights, in the recipient countries, for the enormous funds that flow from Japan to governments like that of President Suharto.

In closing, I would like to thank the commitee for hearing this submission and to humbly urge you to use every means at your disposal to speed up the process of self-determination for the people of East Timor. The liberation of colonial peoples and the establishment of the United Nations are two of the major achievements of the twentieth century. It would be a great tragedy, not only for the Timorese, but for the whole world, if the United Nations were unable to fulfill its mission, before the next century dawns, of facilitating the achievement of independence for the people of East Timor.

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Footnotes

1. The chairman of the Association had "explained the project to (then) Prime Minister Miki Takeo in a one-and-a-half-hour meeting, and the feeling was that Japan will respond once an independent government is formed in East Timor." P. 11 [p.5 of English translation] "Ajia saigo no shokuminchi:Chimōru wo megutte" [On Timor, Asia's Last Colony]. Kōen, No. 1204, Nov. 15, 1975.

2. These conclusions were presented in a meeting in Tokyo in September 1975, after the failure of the coup attempt in August and published in the "Ajia saigo..." cited above.

3. "Ajia Saigo" p.28 [p.17] Also, "...The Democratic Union of Timorese originally had quite a lot of sympathizers. The reason they lost these followers...is because they favored teaming up with Portugal in a gradualist approach, and I think they worked this out with Indonesia. I think the Timorese masses were very afraid of this. Thus support for UDT collapsed while support for Fretilin expanded tremendously. The fact that Fretilin fought under the slogans, "National Independence" and "Sweep Away Long Years of Colonialism Once and For All," was very important." p.20 [p.10]

The importance of Fretilin programs of moderate land reform, health care and basic education is also cited as factors why "it is Fretilin that the people love and have come to depend on." pp.24-5 [p.14]

4. Ibid. p.13 [p.7], cf. p.7 [p.3] Rejection of integration was reflected in lack of support for Apodeti, "an extremely minor faction." Also, "The Timorese had suffered long years of poverty as a colony and they were not going to give their support to a group that merely wanted to change the colonizer to Indonesia. The great majority of the people want independence even if it means continued poverty." p. 27 [p.16]

5. "As far as international supervision of Timor goes, Indonesia is very interested in intervening. At one point they had two destroyers in Dili harbor. The Portuguese governor-general was still in Dili then and, not suprisingly, asked them to leave." Ibid. p.26 [p.15]

6. Ibid. p.19-20 [p.10]

7. "The European Community, although it continued support for Portugal's position, respected Japan's initiative because this was an Asian regional issue. The United States kept a low profile and took a position in line with Japan. Undeniably there was concern about stability in the Pacific

from an expansion of Fretilin strength." And, "Being the only nonpermanent member of the Security Council from East Asia, and in the interests of ASEAN cooperation and out of considerations regarding Indonesia, Japan took an active leadership position throughout. Also taken into consideration was the fact that Indonesia had indicated its intention of withdrawing its troops, and that criticism should not be too provocative. In this, Japan had the cooperation of other nations." Kokusai Rengō no Atarashii Chōryū [New United Nations Currents], Shinyūdō, 1979, pp.18-9.

It is of interest that Ambassador Saito's view about the threat to regional security from Fretilin is at odds with the conservative Japanese businessmens' view. "As far as our information goes, neither China nor the Soviet Union has made any contact whatever with Fretilin. In fact, Fretilin seems to be interested in contacting countries like Australia, and we think it unlikely that Fretilin is thinking, as has been reported in the newspapers, and as Indonesian propaganda has it, of working in the future with China or the Soviet Union to set up a communist regime in the region. Rather, Timor will, though self-determination, opt for complete independence; and I believe that after independence it will look to the neighboring region for aid for economic development." "Ajia Saigō" p.14 [p.7]

8. At the I.G.G.I. meeting in the Hague this June, Japan pledged a total economic assistance package for 1990 of $1.81 billion.

9. A rare decision to stop ODA funding was taken in June of this year when the Foreign Ministry pulled out of the Sardar Sarovar dam project on India's Narmada River after widespread coverage in the Japanese mass media highlighted the resettlement problems of the local residents.